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Kewanee war foe seeks peace amid battle

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BAC LIEU, South Vietnam—While mortar shells explode in the town and Viet Cong battles encircle it, a quiet young American who does not believe in war goes daily about his work.

To Ronald Partridge, 25, Kewanee, Ill., it is the best place—even the only place—for a conscientious objector to be able to ponder the realities of war.

The oddity of his situation seldom occurs to him, or to most of the military personnel in the town. But what is going on in Partridge's mind is a meticulous working out of conscience in the midst of war.

"I REASONED like this," said the tall, serious youth, sitting in his simple little house in Bac Lieu: "As a conscientious objector, I had seated on my left the absolutists who refuse to co-operate with the draft. On the right were those who willingly went.

"Both sides were likely to make greater sacrifices than I was. I felt obligated to make equally demanding commitments. There is also a double obligation in holding to a stand like this one.

"You have the obligation to test out things in terms of

yourself. Can I really live up to this? You also have an obligation to the community of mankind to try to put this into practice — to show it is not just an idle stand.

"So for me the ideal way was to come to Vietnam in a nonmilitary way."

A SHIMER College honor student who was drafted in 1965, Partridge was serving as a conscientious objector at the Quaker Pendle Hill Study Center in Pennsylvania when he decided that was not enough.

He joined the International Voluntary Service (IVS), a highly respected Peace Corps-type organization. Of its 161 volunteers, 23 are conscientious objectors doing alternate service here.

After being assigned to teach English at Bac Lieu High School deep in the Viet Cong-infested Delta, Partridge began sorting out the stages of his adjustment to a very foreign people and situation.

"FIRST I noticed the great differences between us," he said. "Then I went through a stage when I realized that all mankind is one. Then I came to the conclusion that there are deep-seated differences.

"You get to a point where

you begin to grasp the meaning of a different way of life and you begin to understand your own way of life and its meaning to you."

Partridge sees few Americans except one small group of civilians stationed there. His closest friends are the Vietnamese teachers he works with, and he believes he has vaulted the barriers of country and wealth that embitter other American-Vietnamese relations.

"I am the only American in town called by name on the street by people I don't know," he says. "I hear them say, 'That fellow teaches in the high school.' I have been able to create an image of an American individual.

"There is a recurrent suspicion that I am CIA, however. They assume that no American will live with the Vietnamese unless he's after information."

PARTRIDGE was one of a number of IVS volunteers who, filled with frustration over what they felt was the hopelessness of ever settling the war, signed a letter last summer deeply criticizing American policy and saying that the "Vietnamese war is

in itself a great atrocity."

He did not learn until much later that some of the American military in Bac Lieu were furious with him over this. But largely because of the intercession of other American military who respected his right to speak out, not a word was ever said to him.

PARTRIDGE finished his conscientious-objector term this month, and he could go home. But he probably will stay in Bac Lieu to finish his IVS term, which ends next year.

Have his ideas changed in Vietnam?

"First, I met many sincere Americans," he said. "I found Communist and people working with the government who I have friends who are anti- would not be compatible with a Communist government. Still the realities of the U.S. program only confirmed what I had read about it in the States.

"All in all, the only real change in the character of my beliefs about war in general, and this one in particular, is the added personal dimension. This has made it a real thing, with real human beings."

Then he walked out onto the dirt street and rolled out his bike to go to the eight hours of classes he teaches every day. It was a strange place for a man who does not believe in war.